

Coping with an Alcohol Problem

Nearly 14 million Americans have an alcohol problem. Alcoholism is the third-largest killer in the United States, and alcohol contributes to 100,000 deaths annually, ranking it as the third leading cause of preventable mortality in America. Despite these staggering statistics, there are highly successful treatment options available to help if you or a loved one has an alcohol problem.

Alcohol's Effect on the Body

Ethyl alcohol is created by the fermentation of sugars from grains and fruits. Alcohol is absorbed in the small intestine and metabolized in the liver to produce energy and heat. A normal liver can process about 50 alcohol calories an hour (one ounce of 40 percent alcohol). Your rate of intoxication depends on your body size (it takes more alcohol to intoxicate a large person), body fat, food present in your body, and the concentration of alcohol over time. Most states define legal intoxication as a blood-alcohol concentration of 0.08 percent or less.

Modest amounts of alcohol (up to two drinks a day for men [e.g., two 12-ounce bottles of beer] and one for women) are not considered harmful. When consumed, alcohol first acts as a tranquilizer or sedative to depress the central nervous system, causing relaxation and reduced blood pressure (although blood pressure increases the more you drink). In moderate to higher doses, it can cause impairment of thoughts, judgment, emotions, muscle coordination and speech. In extreme doses, alcohol can lead to brain damage, coma and possibly death.

Dangers of Drinking

Drinking alcohol can increase your risk of:

- Liver damage;
- Heart disease;
- Cancer (liver, esophageal, larynx, throat, pancreatic, and other organs);
- Ulcers;
- Brain damage;
- Malnutrition (alcohol impairs food digestion and robs the body of minerals and vitamins);
- Accidents (vehicular, on-the-job and recreational);
- Depression and suicide;
- Broken relationships (with family, friends, relatives and co-workers);
- Blackouts and memory loss;
- Delirium tremens (DTs): severe withdrawal symptoms, which may include confusion, memory loss, delirium, hallucinations, tremors and seizures;
- Violent behavior and homicide; and
- Fetal damage (for pregnant mothers).

Some warning signs of alcoholic drinking include:

- Preferring to drink alone;
- Using alcohol to cope, relieve pain or relax;
- Feeling guilty about drinking;
- Missing or arriving late to work or events because of drinking;
- Experiencing blackouts (periods of lost memory when drinking) or memory lapses;
- Becoming moody, agitated or violent after drinking;
- Realizing that your drinking is becoming a problem for you and your loved ones;
- Having loved ones, friends or co-workers complain or worry about your drinking;

- Making promises to stop drinking for specific periods of time; and
- Being unable to moderate your drinking once you have started.

Experts regard alcoholism as a chronic disease that may be genetically linked and influenced by psychosocial and environmental factors. An alcoholic continues to abuse alcohol even after negative consequences happen, such as the onset of health problems, drunk-driving arrests and breakups in relationships.

Symptoms of Alcoholism

The symptoms of alcoholism include:

- Frequent and excessive drinking of alcohol;
- Strong craving for alcohol;
- Lack of control (once you've begun drinking, you are unable to stop);
- Increased tolerance (you need to increase the amounts of alcohol to achieve the same "high" feeling);
- Physical dependency (after you stop drinking for a certain period of time, you may experience withdrawal symptoms, including high blood pressure and body temperature, shakiness, diarrhea, nausea, insomnia, sweating, anxiety and DTs);
- Poor health;
- Alcohol obsession (anticipating your next drinking occasion); and
- Denial of a problem and making excuses for drinking.

Treatment Options

Alcoholism is a treatable disease. The first step in treatment is to admit you have a problem. Unless you acknowledge this, you may not seek or follow through with treatment and abstinence from alcohol. The second step is to get help by talking to your doctor or contacting a professional who can refer you to a treatment program. Call your employee-assistance program (EAP) for a referral.

Several different treatment methods for alcoholism exist. Your doctor's approach to treatment will depend on the severity of the problem and community resources available. Typical treatment methods include:

- Detoxification: In some cases, withdrawing from alcohol without medical supervision can be fatal. You can withdraw safely and with proper medical supervision at a special clinic or hospital-based detoxification unit. This process may take up to five days.
- Medications: Your doctor may prescribe certain drugs to treat your withdrawal symptoms and cravings.
- Medical treatments: Your doctor also may treat conditions related to your alcohol problem, including high blood pressure, hypoglycemia and liver disease.
- Counseling and education: Individual therapy, group counseling and participation in support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous can help you recognize why you drink, learn coping and techniques and improve your relationships.
- Complete abstinence from alcohol: The majority of experts agree that an alcoholic can never drink safely or moderately over time. Someone who has an alcohol problem should consult a doctor or clinic before trying to detox oneself.

Repairing Relationships

An alcohol problem can take a terrible toll on loved ones. While it is vital that you receive treatment for alcoholism, it is just as important that your family members get the help they need. Spouses, children and relatives may be in denial about your problem or emotionally drained by fear and anxiety.

Encourage your loved ones to seek counseling and therapy to resolve their issues. Consider family and marriage counseling to heal emotional wounds and differences once you have had some experience living sober. Encourage family members to join a support group like Al-Anon.

It is very important to realize that alcoholism is a disease for life, one that currently has no cure. It is possible that you may suffer a drinking relapse. If so, don't get discouraged. Seek professional help immediately, get back in touch with your support group, ask your loved ones for support and patience, and recommit yourself to avoiding alcohol. Continue to receive therapy, and stay active with support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Support Resources

If you think you or a loved one may have an alcohol problem, help is available. Call your EAP to get the counseling and assistance you need. For further help with your problem or more information, consider contacting these organizations:

- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): (212) 870-3400 or www.aa.org;
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD): (800) NCA-CALL or www.ncadd.org; or
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: www.niaaa.nih.gov.

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